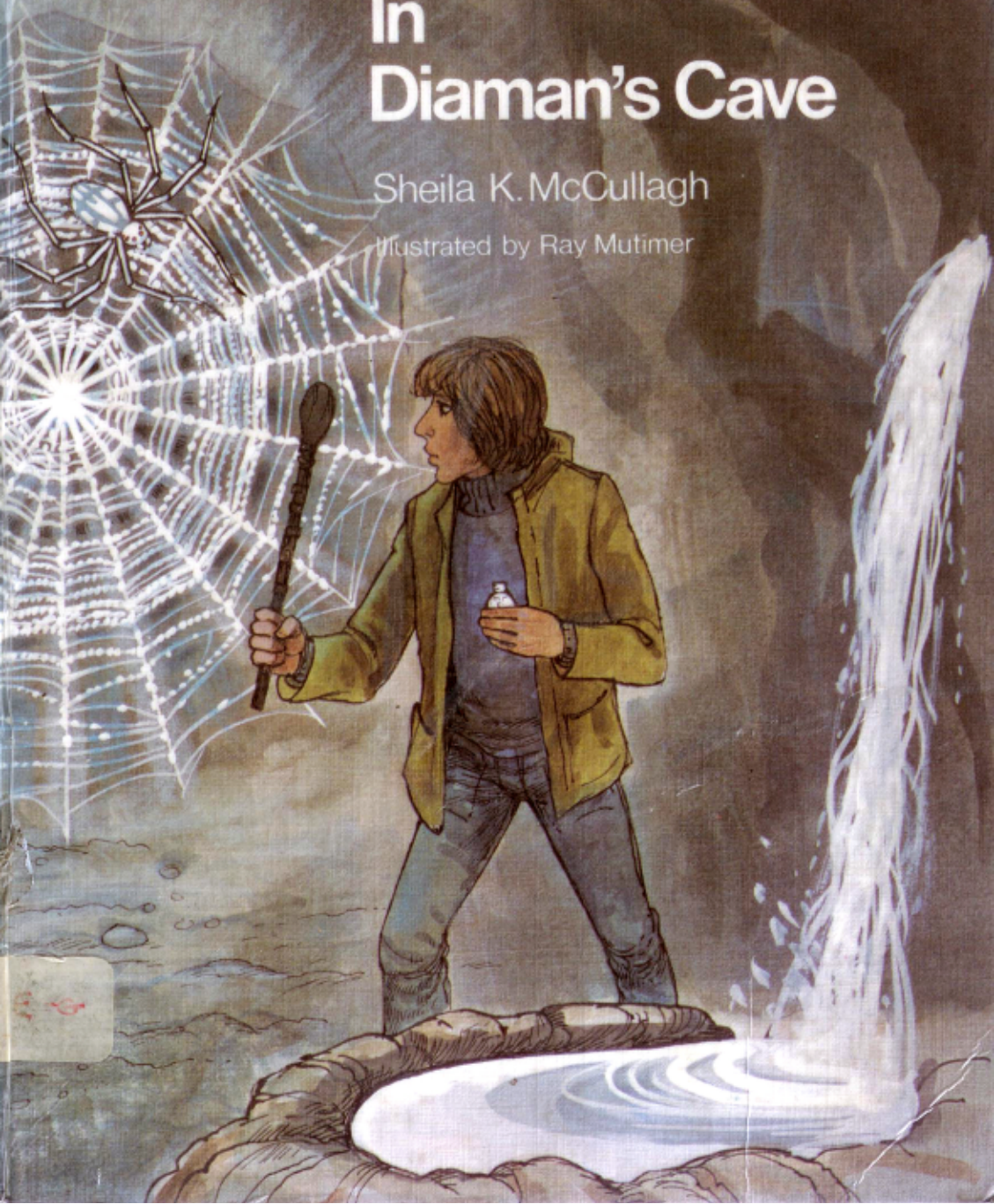


Tim and the Hidden People

In Diaman's Cave

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Ray Mutimer



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ARNOLD-WHEATON



The sun had set, but the sky was still light in the west as Tim set out along the path across the island. Black clouds were sweeping in from the north, and the wind was cold. Tim was glad of his thick jersey. It kept him much warmer than the one he had left on the beach below.

He looked eastwards across the sea towards the mainland. Dark clouds were gathering there, but the sky over the sea was still clear, and he could see the stars.

It wasn't difficult to find the path. It was marked by little piles of stones, about fifty metres apart, and he could see the edge of the cliffs on the far side of the island. He hadn't far to go.

A flash of lightning lit the sky over the mainland, and the sound of thunder rolled across the sea.

"It's a strange storm," Tim said to himself. "It seems to be all in one place."

He didn't stop to watch the lightning; he went on, along the path. The sky was clear over the island, and for the time being, Tim wanted to think about what he had to do. He wanted to think about Diaman's Cave, the silver web which he had to break, and the silver water he must bring back in the flask at his belt. He could think about storms later, when he had to get back to the mainland.





The path ended at the edge of the cliff, on the far side of the island.

Tim followed it nearly to the end. Then he dropped to the ground and pulled himself carefully forward until he could see over the cliff's edge.

Directly below him the black cliffs dropped down like a wall. It was a good two hundred metres to the wild sea below. But steps had been cut in the rock, leading down to a wide, grassy ledge to the right, half-way down the cliff. On the far side of the ledge, Tim saw the entrance to a cave.

"Diaman's Cave!" he whispered to himself. "Diaman's Cave!"

He lay quite still, watching the entrance. There was no sign of life. Nothing came out of the cave, and nothing went into it.



At first he could see no sign of the silver web. But as he watched, Tim saw that the entrance to the cave was not quite the black hole it seemed to be. A faint, silvery light was coming from the cave. As the last light faded from the sky, the light in the cave seemed to grow stronger.

Tim listened, but he could hear nothing but the wind, and the waves breaking on the rocks below.

He took a last, careful look all around. There was no sign of anyone among the heather, or down below him on the beach, where the waves were breaking.

Tim slipped carefully over the edge of the cliff, and climbed down the rock steps to the grassy ledge.

When he stood at the foot of the steps and looked around him, he saw that the ledge was more like the stage of a theatre, cut into the cliff. The steep rock walls rose up on three sides of the flat, wide patch of grass. On the fourth side, the cliff dropped away to the beach, a hundred metres below.

He couldn't feel the wind now. The rock walls were around him on three sides. He could see the wind blowing the spray along the crests of the waves below, but the only wind which could blow into Diaman's Cave would be a wind from the sea.

The silvery light shone out from the entrance to the cave. It was much stronger, now that he was down on the grass beside it. But he still couldn't see the web.

Tim walked softly across the grass to the entrance of the cave. It was like the entrance to a great tunnel. There was a pile of rocks at one side of it. But the floor of the cave was smooth. Inside the entrance, the cave turned sharply to the right.

Tim looked round carefully. His eyes were used to the dark, and the starlight seemed brighter than he had ever seen it before. There was no one on the steps down the cliff, and no one looking down from the edge of the cliff above him. There was no sign of anyone or anything moving at all.

Tim took a deep breath. He gripped Digory's club hard in his right hand, and stepped into the cave.



The cave turned sharply to the right. The silvery light was coming from somewhere down there, beyond the bend. Tim crept softly along to the corner, and looked round it.

The whole cave was lit by silvery light.

A great web hung from the roof like a curtain. It was fastened to the walls, and it hung there like a giant spider's web, covered in frost. It shone so brightly, that it seemed to be made of strands of shining silver light.

The web was one of the most beautiful things Tim had ever seen. He stood quite still, staring at it. He hadn't expected the web to look like that.

After a minute or two, Tim looked right through it. On the far side of the web, farther down the cave, he could see a great rock basin. It stood on the floor of the cave, full of shining silver water.

The water trickled out of a hole in the side of the cave, and splashed down into the basin with a sound like silver bells. A piece of rock had been cut out of the edge of the basin, and the silver water trickled out of the cut, along the floor of the cave, and down into a dark hole at one side. The silver water shone even more brightly than the silver web.

Tim stood quite still, and looked and looked and looked. It was so beautiful, that for a few minutes he forgot why he was there.

Then he remembered. He gave himself a little shake. He had to break the web, and fill the flask with the silver water. He didn't want to break something as beautiful as the web, but he had to do it.





He stepped forward, lifted Digory's club, and struck the web as hard as he could.

The club tore a great hole down through the web. The broken ends of web dropped on each side, like silver hair hanging down from the roof.

Tim struck at the web again and again, until the hole was big enough for him to step through.

Then he moved forward.



As he stepped through the web, the broken ends came to life. They swung out from the cliff wall, and wrapped themselves around him. They wrapped themselves around his arms and legs and body. He felt the soft, silver hair across his face, and for a moment all he could see was a silver mist in front of his eyes.



Tim tore the silver web away from his face, with his left hand. (He still gripped the club in his right.) He pressed forward against the pull of the silver strands, towards the basin of silver water, while the strands of the web gripped him, to hold him back.

Slowly, he tore himself free.

Another three steps, and the last strands of silver web fell away.

Tim was breathing hard, and his knees were shaking.



For a moment, he thought that he saw something move among the shadows on the rock walls of the cave. But when he looked again, he could see nothing alive. Rocks jutted out in places from the walls, and the shadows beside them were very dark. There were holes in the walls, too. Some of them were big enough for him to crawl through, and he wondered whether they led to other caves.

He looked towards the rock basin. The silver water was shining, and the sound of it trickling down made him feel better.



He moved quickly along the cave to the basin. He pushed up his jersey, and pulled the silver flask from his belt. He unscrewed the cap, and dipped the flask into the silver water.

The water felt very cold on his fingers. The flask filled slowly – much more slowly than he had expected it to.

Tim waited until it was quite full. Then he carefully screwed the top back into place, and clipped the flask back on to his belt.



He stood up, turned round to go back down the cave, and stopped, staring.

The silver web was back in its place, like a curtain across the cave, and in the middle of the web was a great silver spider. The spider was fastening the last threads of web together, and as Tim stood staring at it, the spider turned towards him and stared back, with shining, red eyes.



Tim gripped Digory's club firmly in his right hand. Digory had said that he could break the web with the club, and he had been right. Digory had also said that he could smash the spider.

He leapt forward, and lifted the club.

But as he lifted it, he thought how beautiful the web looked, with its strands of silvery light. If he smashed the spider, perhaps no one would ever see the web again.

He stopped for a moment, but he had to get through.

He swung the club down on to the web, just to one side of the spider.



The spider drew back for a second. Its red eyes glared at him. Then a stream of silver shot out from the spider on to his hand, burning like fire.

Tim swung the club down again. Even with the pain in his hand, he didn't want to kill the spider unless he had to. He swung the club at the web. He didn't want to smash the creature which made such a beautiful thing.

The club tore a great hole through the web, and the spider leapt to the side of the cave.

Tim could have hit it easily now. But he dropped his arm, and forced his way through the hole in the web.



A minute later, Tim had torn himself free of the silver strands. He was through.

He stopped for a moment to look at his right hand. It was very painful. The sleeve of his jersey had saved his arm, but his hand was burning. He pulled out his handkerchief. There was a trickle of ordinary water running down the side of the cave. He held the handkerchief in it for a moment, and then wrapped it round his hand. That felt better. He began to run.



As he turned the corner, he stopped with a gasp.

The heap of stones at one side of the entrance had gone, and a stone man, with a long stone club in his hand, was standing in the opening.

The stone man moved his head, as if he were listening. His stone club swung upwards. He must have called out, because Tim saw the stones where his mouth was move, but he heard nothing. Tim could see the stone man's eyes shining in the light in the cave, but the stone man's eyes were not fixed on Tim. They were looking past him. The stone man had heard him, but he had not seen him.

As Tim stood there, standing as still as a stone himself, and hardly daring to breathe, he seemed to hear Grandmother Roon's voice, as she whispered the spell:

“Stone shield of the stone men,
Hide your keeper from stone men's eyes.
Stone shield of the stone men,
Keep him safe from the stone men's blows.
Guard your keeper wherever he goes,
And make him deaf to the stone men's lies.”

Tim slipped his left hand under his jersey, and pulled out the shield stone, so that it was hanging outside, on his chest.

Just touching the shield stone made him feel better. The stone men couldn't hurt him. He needn't be afraid.

He took a step forward. The stone man didn't move, but it seemed to Tim that he was listening.

Tim stepped forward again. He kicked against a stone. The stone man turned towards him.



Tim lifted his club, sprang forward, and swung the club down on to the stone man's right hand.

The stones making the man's hand and arm crashed to the ground. His stone club spun sideways, striking the cave wall. It broke in half as it fell.



In a flash, Tim had leapt past the stone man, and was out of the cave, and running across the grass as hard as he could.

For a few moments, it seemed very dark outside, but he could see the cliff edge, and he made for the steps. There were no other stone men on the way.



By the time he got to the steps, he could see quite well. The moon had come up, the sky was clear, and the stars were shining.

He glanced back over his shoulder. The stone man hadn't tried to follow him. There was no one behind him on the grassy ledge.

He climbed quickly up the steps and over the edge of the cliff. He was panting a little, and he felt so excited that he hardly noticed the pain in his right hand. He had done it! He had the flask of silver water safely clipped on his belt.



He did not see a tall, dark figure, standing by a pile of stones on the moor, watching him. It was a man of almost giant size, wrapped in a dark cloak. A hood was pulled forward over his face, and he had a sword in his hand.



A small, bent figure, got up from the ground like a dark shadow at the tall man's side.

"Kill him, Diaman!" the figure whispered. "Kill him! He has stolen the silver water. He has broken the silver web. Kill him! Hurl him over the cliff! Hurl him down to the rocks below!"

The tall dark figure did not move. Diaman stood very still in the darkness, watching Tim. Then, slowly, he shook his head.

"He did not kill the spider," he said slowly. "The spider burnt him, and still he did not kill it. He is one of the Ordinary Folk, and he has not taken the water for himself. Let the boy go."

The small bent figure dropped back into the shadows.

Tim went on his way, along the path back to the cove. He did not look up, towards the stones, until he reached the edge of the cliff above the cove. And when he did look back, there was no one there.

Tim stood on the cliff's edge, looking down to the sands below. There were dark shadows by the rocks and under the cliff, but he could see no one there.

He looked out over the sea. The waves were breaking on the sands in a rush of white water, but the wind had dropped, and the stars were shining.

Very far out to sea, he saw a boat. It seemed to be coming towards the island.

"But it can't be Alan," Tim said to himself. "It's coming from much farther off – from somewhere across the sea. Perhaps there are more islands farther west."

The boat looked a little strange. It seemed to be moving straight towards him, as if it could travel over the sea without the men in it having to think about the wind or the tide. And it was moving very quickly. It had been a long way out when he first saw it, but already he could see that there was only one man in the boat. The man was standing at the wheel, steering the boat in.

"Suppose – suppose it's Diaman!" Tim thought.

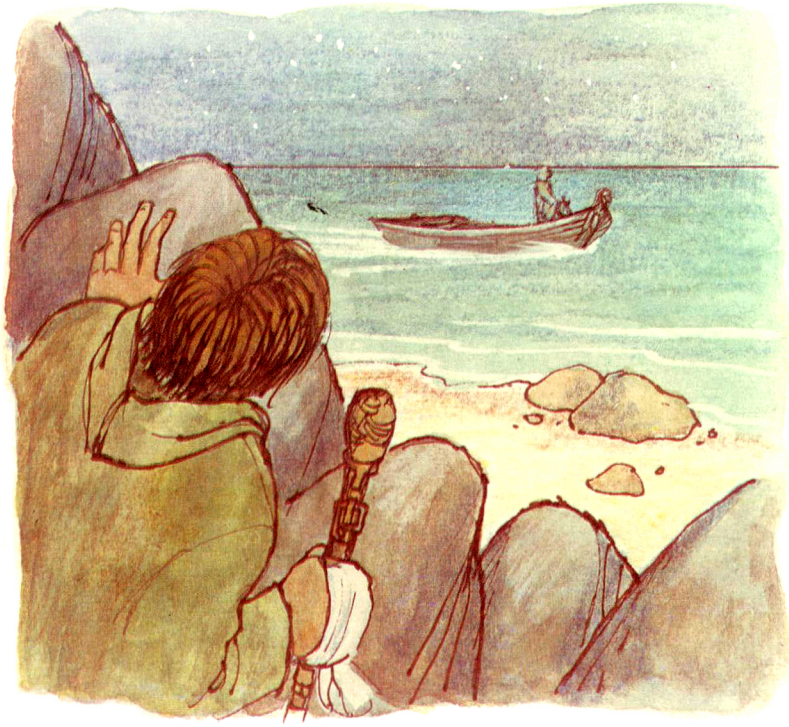
He dropped to the ground, so that whoever was in the boat would not see him against the sky, as he stood there on the edge of the cliff.

He wondered whether he should hide on the moor, or get down to the beach while he could still climb down without being seen.



He crouched down for a few moments, thinking. Then he began to move down the path towards the sands. He didn't want to stay on the moor. He felt that there was danger there. And even if the boat landed in the cove below him, there were plenty of rocks where he could hide.

Slowly and carefully, Tim made his way down towards the sea.



He reached the sands while the boat was still a little way out to sea, and slipped over to some rocks, to hide. It was dark there, in the shadows of the rocks. Now he would see whoever was coming to the island, without being seen himself.

Tim looked out between the rocks. The boat was coming in towards the cove. There was no doubt about that. Whoever was in the boat, was going to land on the island.



The boat swept in through the breaking waves, in through the rush of white water, and up on to the sands. Two metal feet shot out from its sides, and the boat stayed there on the sand, upright.

A man jumped down from the boat and began to walk up the sands towards the cliff.

It was Grandfather Strome.

* * * * *

On the mainland, the sun was streaming in through the windows of Pen's cottage.

Arun turned over on his straw sack, and opened his eyes. He sat up, and looked quickly around him.

The table was set with bread and honey, and Pen was bending over a blackspot on the fire. There was no sign of Alan Tremaine.

"It's morning!" cried Arun.

Pen looked up and laughed. "Of course it's morning," she said. "Did you think the sunshine was the witches' lightning?"

Arun tossed back the blanket and stood up. "It was a terrific storm," he said.

He remembered how he had felt the night before. They had only just settled down to sleep, when a terrific thunderstorm had broken over the cottage. The black clouds, which had come down on the hills, had been split from edge to edge by the lightning. The thunder had smashed down over the cottage, as if some giant were breaking stones across the roof. The rain had poured down, until the rushing water in the little stream outside had spilled over its banks, and rushed past only a few metres below the cottage door.

They had looked out of the windows, and seen the wind witches riding the storm. There were seven of them up there, in the gale of wind which blew around the house. The witches had swept down over the roof, up over the hills, and down over the cottage again, as the lightning lit the dark night outside.



But the cottage had been built to stand storms and lightning. Pen and Alan and Arun had been safe enough inside. As the storm dropped, they had heard the goats shaking their heads and ringing their bells, so they knew that the goats were safe, too. And then the storm had died away and the witches had gone, riding the wind, and Arun had gone to sleep on the sack of straw by the cottage fire.

Arun stretched his arms. It had been an exciting night, and he hadn't had much sleep.

He heard steps running outside. The door of the cottage was flung open, and Alan Tremaine came in.

"Pen! Arun! Who do you think is coming?" Alan cried. "I went down to the stream to wash, and looked down to the cove and the sea. There's a boat coming in – it's coming in from the west. I knew the boat as soon as I saw it. Who do you think is in it?"

"It's Grandfather Strome – and Tim!"

“Tim!” shouted Arun.

The three of them ran out of the cottage, and down the path by the stream to the little cove, with Sebastian tearing along ahead of them.

A boat was just coming in through the waves, and running in right on to the sands.

They rushed down to meet it, as Grandfather Strome climbed down over the stern, and Tim himself jumped down from the bows, and ran up the sands towards them.



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3. The Shield Stone
4. The Storm over the Sea
5. The Cave of the Wind Witches
6. In Diaman's Cave
7. Danger on the Moor
8. At the Hill of the Stone Prisons

Flightpath to Reading D6



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